

WASHINGTON, DC – The General Accounting Office (GAO) today released a report requested by Representatives Pete Stark (D-CA) and James Greenwood (R-PA) researching staffing problems in child welfare agencies that impact the quality of care provided to children.

The report finds that low wages, high caseloads, staff shortages and lack of adequate staff training make it difficult for child welfare agencies to recruit and retain child welfare workers. The resulting staff turnover and shortages hamper the ability of child welfare agencies to ensure that abused and neglected children are in safe environments and that permanency is achieved for foster children.

“This report clearly shows that all too often we lose child welfare workers because their caseloads are too high and they don’t earn enough money to pay their bills,” said Congressman Stark. “The tragic consequence is that children suffer. Lack of resources for child welfare workers leads to unnecessary deaths and protracted periods of abuse and neglect for children— much of which could have been prevented if child welfare workers had the resources they need to do their jobs correctly.”

“Prior to serving as a public official, I worked with abused and neglected children at the Bucks County (Pennsylvania) Children and Youth Social Service Agency,” said Congressman Greenwood. “The work was highly rewarding despite the challenges posed by overwhelming caseloads and high turnover among my colleagues due to the low salaries.”

Specifically, the report found that large caseloads and worker turnover delayed the timeliness of investigations and limited the frequency of home visits with children. The report found that this worker turnover and staff shortages left remaining staff with insufficient time to establish critical trusting relationships with the families and children which are important to make the necessary decisions to ensure safe and stable permanent placements.

The GAO report found promising practices in several states to address these problems. In California and Kentucky, programs have been created that provide tuition stipends for students who commit to work for two years as child welfare workers. More than 80% of the program participants have remained in their jobs beyond their work commitment.

“The report confirms what many folks in the social work community have been saying for years. High turnover rates and staffing shortages leave remaining staff with insufficient time to assess the safety of each child and make a thoughtful recommendation for placement. I hope that this report helps local and state officials better understand the barriers child welfare workers face each day on the job,” concluded Rep. Greenwood.

“This report shows that child welfare workers must be better paid and better trained if we are to have a child welfare system that best protects our children’s safety. Thankfully, some states are taking action, but much more must be done,” concluded Rep. Stark.

A copy of the GAO Report, Child Welfare: HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff, is located at www.gao.gov